

Noyemzar Will Never Forget

By Linda J. Peters

It's a gray Sunday afternoon, the week after Easter and I'm sitting on the couch next to Grandma in her tiny living room. Smiling photographs of her four children, 13 grandchildren, and 16 great-grandchildren adorn the walls of her Cranston, Rhode Island apartment. A year-round crche scene – complete with manger, baby Jesus, animals, wise men, a mirror pond lined with pebbles, and plastic shrubs covering a plastic hillside – takes up a good chunk of the floor space. Miniature furniture crocheted by her, dipped in sugar water and dried to stiff and exact shapes of chairs, tables, cups, pitchers, lounge chairs, chalices, flowers and trees cover her marble-topped coffee table, along with more photos of her offspring. There's barely enough room for a coffee cup.

Sitting across from us in a rocking chair is Grandma's son-in-law and my father-in-law, Avedis Mahdesian. He's agitated. He's trying to translate into English what Grandma is telling him in rapid-fire Armenian. Sitting at the edge of the couch, she's telling me the story of her life, all the while rubbing her knees or the couch cushion or fidgeting with the television remote control on the TV tray next to her. She's wearing an ankle-length black house dress with white embroidered accents. I'm in black. My father-in-law is dressed in a dark blue suit. With only the cloudy afternoon light sifting through the light catchers suctioned to the windows, it feels like a day for which funerals are made. It seems fitting, almost planned. For the life story of a 92-year-old Armenian woman named Noyemzar Alexanian – and for most Armenians of her generation – is a story of death.

They came looking for rope. On a spring morning in 1915, the villagers of Baghin, Palou – an Armenian territory occupied by Turkey – awoke to the sight of the Kurdish cavalry surrounding them. More were coming down from the mountains. "Nobody knew what was happening at first," says Grandma. "The Kurdish were hired by the Turks to do their dirty work," adds my father-in-law.

The soldiers went from house to house, asking for rope. After that they took the males, 15 years of age and older, and collected them. "It was like yesterday," says Grandma. "My mother told me to go to my aunt's house across the street. I climbed to the roof. I was watching them round up all the males at the house of one of our teachers. They used the rope to tie their hands. The soldiers told them that if anyone gave them gold coins or jewelry, they would let them go. But when they got the valuables, they still

didn't let them go."

The men and teen-aged boys were taken to a distant field and stabbed to death. Thinking quickly, Noyemzar's mother, Baidzar Khimatian, dressed her husband, Garabed, in women's clothes and they escaped to a village where a friendly Kurdish family lived, about eight miles away. He wasn't hidden for long, though. "I remember my father and three other people from Baghin being taken away to be killed by the Kurds, and my mother is yelling, 'Please help! Please help!' as they're taking them away. A friendly Kurd later told my mother that my father begged to be shot, not butchered," says Grandma. "He was butchered," says Avedis, "not murdered, butchered." The six-year-old Noyemzar watched the white shirt of her father as he was led up a mountainside by the soldiers. The white shirt became a white dot, and then it was gone.

Baidzar took her four children – her daughters Noyemzar, Satenig and Zevart, her son, Markar – and her mother to another friendly Kurdish family's house in a lonely field. Fearing for her son's life, Baidzar took him and fled, leaving her elderly mother to watch over three young grandchildren. "My grandmother was too old, she couldn't take care of us," says Grandma, her eyes filling with tears. "So one day she took me and my sisters down to the river to drown us. But she couldn't bring herself to do it."

Soon Baidzar sent two sympathetic Kurds to bring the rest of her family to the village where she had fled with Markar. Along the way, they also picked up Asdoor, a 15-year-old relative who was deaf and mute. One of the Kurds, they soon found out, was not sympathetic to their plight, and tried to get Asdoor to take off his clothes. The boy knew what was going to happen, so he grabbed the Kurd's knife in self-defense. "The Kurd stabbed him in the back with it," says Grandma.

The women and children were marked for death as well. While staying at the home of a Kurdish man married to an Armenian woman, Baidzar and her children heard a knock at the door. A Turkish soldier entered and ordered all the Armenians – women and children – into a caravan to be taken away and killed. The Kurdish man protested, saying that he couldn't part with his wife. The soldier took out his rifle and killed him in front of his wife and children, and Baidzar's family.

Before being herded off into the death-bound caravan, Baidzar gave two gold coins to a friendly Kurd and persuaded him to keep two of her children – Noyemzar and Satenig. In the panic and confusion, little Zevart disappeared. "She's lost. We don't know what happened to her, whether she's dead or

alive,” says Grandma, raising her hands in a plea.

As the caravan arrived at the village where they were to be killed, Baidzar pleaded with the Kurdish leader of that village to spare her life and the lives of her son Markar and her mother. The leader agreed. He spared the lives of many other Armenians, including numerous families from Baghin.

The Khimatian family was still divided between two villages, almost 10 miles apart. They could only visit by getting permission from the Kurds. Noyemzar was only six, yet she was the mother to her little sister, Satenig, who suffered from chronic stomach problems. ”I tried to comfort her, but there were no lights, no electricity, no doctor,” says Grandma, stroking the couch cushion. ”She died in that Kurdish village.”

Noyemzar buried her sister’s body in a shallow grave. Two Kurdish girls asked if she could take them to see the gravesite. When they got there, all they found was hair. Wolves had eaten her sister’s body.

One day, her brother Markar and his friend, Hovagim Hagopian, came to take Noyemzar to visit her mother. Along the way, Hovagim told her, ”Learn the way so you can escape from where you are.” After a Kurd brought Noyemzar back to the village where she was staying, she made up her mind to escape the next day. ”It was a cloudy, rainy day, like this,” says Grandma, motioning toward the window. ”I ran and ran and ran.” The six-year-old, frightened girl ran for miles across wolf-infested fields and mountainous landscapes, until she miraculously reached the village where her mother was staying. When the Kurds came looking for little Noyemzar to bring her back, Baidzar brazenly informed them that her daughter didn’t want to return. Noyemzar was allowed to stay.

To get by, Baidzar would make cloth and barter it for food. Markar worked on a farm, taking care of the animals. Baidzar’s brother, Hovsep, who worked in the village, came to their house one day and told his sister that the Kurds had beaten him. ”My mother gave gold coins to my uncle so he could escape to Kharpert,” says Grandma. Markar also escaped to Kharpert, a town with orphanages for the children of refugees.

By that time, Noyemzar was about eight years old. Her mother asked for permission to visit Markar and Hovsep, and told little Noyemzar to escape to her aunt’s house in another village. ”There was this older Armenian girl who was going to be forced into marrying a Kurd. So one night I asked her if she wanted to escape with me. She said yes. So I told her to go to the cemetery and hide behind a big stone, and when she sees me, to pop her head up so I can see her.” The plan worked. Noyemzar, who was tending sheep, met up

with the girl, Alvgan, and together they escaped to the village of Noyemzar's aunt, Yeghsig. When they got there, the two refugees parted ways. Alvgan soon left for yet another village, where— ironically — she was forced to marry a Kurdish man. Fifteen days later, Noyemzar's aunt found a friendly Kurd to take her young niece to Kharpert.

When she arrived, Noyemzar found that Markar was in an orphanage run by American missionaries, and Baidzar was supporting herself and her mother by harvesting wheat. "Children too young to work were put into orphanages," explains my father-in-law. With a mother too poor to support her, Noyemzar sought refuge on the steps of an Armenian church that operated an orphanage. The priest let her in because she was so young. She stayed there for about two years.

The year was 1919 and the Turkish government was relocating the Armenian refugees out of Turkish-occupied territories, including Kharpert, and into Syria. Noyemzar, Baidzar, Markar, and Baidzar's mother were herded once again into wagons, bound for Aleppo, Syria. On the way, bands of marauding thieves stopped them and robbed them of their gold and jewelry in exchange for safe passage to Syria. The wagons filled mostly with orphans poured into Syria, where they stayed for only a few weeks before being shipped in caravans to orphanages in Beirut, Lebanon. Noyemzar stayed in an American-run orphanage called Seaside, where she also attended school. Eventually her mother and brother and grandmother tracked her down, with their sights set on America — via Marseilles, France — and Havana, Cuba.

Fifteen-year-old Noyemzar and her family arrived in Cuba on August 31, 1924. Prior to that year, the United States had no quotas on the numbers of Turkish citizens (Armenians were considered citizens of Turkey) entering the country. But that year, the U.S. government virtually slammed the door shut, leaving hundreds of thousands of Armenians stranded in Cuba. In addition to Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish, Noyemzar soon became fluent in Spanish, with a Cuban accent. She also learned to cook excellent tamales.

In 1925, Noyemzar joined the Armenian Red Cross, now called the Armenian Relief Society, of which she is still a member. The organization provides help to destitute Armenians scattered all across the globe.

While in Cuba, Noyemzar, at age 22, married fellow refugee and shoemaker, Krikor Alexanian. They married on November 26, 1931. "My mother and brother said I should marry a good man. They said he was a good man," says Grandma with a smile. While a boy, Krikor had seen his father shot by a Turkish soldier.

Krikor and Noyemzar raised their four children – daughters Nevart (my mother-in-law) and Astrig, and sons Moorad and Antranig – in an Armenian home with a dash of Cuban culture. All four speak Armenian with Cuban accents and Spanish with Armenian inflections.

My father-in-law is standing at the window, getting ready to leave. "To this day, the Turks deny the genocide," he says. "Those are our territories they occupied – we have title – they have possession. And there have been no reparations. Nobody's apologized." He also tells me that this was not the first Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turkish government. The first was in 1894, when they massacred Armenians in several areas, in order to take control of the land.

This second genocide began on April 24, 1915. "They rounded up all the Armenian intelligentsia – all the professors, the government leaders, the priests – and they hung them in the public square," Avedis says pacing. By the end of that genocide, more than 1.5 million people were dead. When Adolph Hitler was planning his genocide of the Jews and others in the 1930s, his advisors warned him of the negative world reaction. His infamous response to them was: "Who today remembers the Armenians?"

With his gray trench coat on, my father-in-law adds, "The U.S. and Turkey are allies – the U.S. doesn't want to call it genocide, just 'actions taken during war time.' The Turkish government is funding academic chairs in universities here for apologetics to deny the genocide ever happened."

I turn to Grandma and ask her what kept her going through all those horrendous times. She tells me of the night in the Kurdish village, after Satenig's death, when she sat at the edge of her bed as blood streamed from her nose all night, the time she had malaria, and the time she had typhoid fever in Havana. "God is with me," she says.

One by one, beginning in the early 1950s, Noyemzar's adult children came to America, married U.S. citizens and finally in 1957, Noyemzar and Krikor Alexanian completed their journey to safety and freedom. Baidzar Khimatian never made it to America. She died in Cuba in 1947.

Noyemzar and Krikor lived, worked and retired in Rhode Island. For years, they lived in South Providence. My husband, Gregory, the first-born son of a first-born son, remembers the all-night pinochle games between Noyemzar, Markar and their spouses and other relatives. The card games were punctuated with loud arguments, accusations of cheating, and laughter.

"I'm thinking much, thinking much about my brother. He died in America. Krikor died in 2002. "Now I'm alone, I'm alone," says this woman

sitting amidst dozens of family photographs. She shows me a photograph of an elaborate white, crocheted tablecloth. The lace-like design is in the form of angels blowing trumpets. I ask her when she learned to crochet. "In Cuba," she says. "I look, I make – nobody teaches me."

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